

Why the Reality is Not Totalisable: An Introduction to Paul Ricoeur's Philosophy of Action

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Abstract

This article the matises Ricoeur's speculative parcours around the philosophy of action. It starts by offering a perspective on French (Continental) philosophy's contribution to the Philosophy of Action. The roles played by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology, and the Structure lists are particularly emphasised, including references to Ricoeur's speculative researches. These Ricoeurian developments can be connected under a general anthropological perspective, creating a double (productive) implication: (1) to recognise a new interpretative key for the Ricoeurian parcours, and (2) to find a new (Ricoeurian) way to defend the idea of the gnoseological and epistemological impossibility that considers the reality of the world as a comprehensive knowledge.

Keywords: Action, Reality, Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, Anthropology

Introduction

Philosophy of action's continued significance and use in contemporary French philosophy primarily depends on the phenomenological (phenomenological-existential) tradition, as well as philosophical hermeneutics and structuralism. Within this framework, philosophy of action is defined as a broad inter-discipline or inter-dominion, ranging from the general practical philosophy to existentialism, and covering such diverse fields as pragmatism, philosophy of mind and language, structuralism and linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and beyond. The general philosophy of action had its first speculative articulation in the Francophone area. The philosophical-religious work carried out in the mid-nineteenth century by Léon Ollé-Laprune and Maurice Blondel turned the focus of the field to the moral idealism of action (Fichte). A century later, philosophy of action underwent new developments in the same area, first through Sartre's phenomenological-existential analysis and then via Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological-hermeneutical researches (who developed his work between Paris and Leuven). Ricoeur conducted a large survey under the title *phenomenological hermeneutics of the self* (a philosophical anthropology realised through an interpretative description) which has done so much with traditions and approaches cultivated in France and the Anglo-American philosophy of action. Reconsidering Ricoeur's speculative course on action makes it possible to pass through some of the most significant themes and figures of philosophy of action and much of Ricoeur's personal research. Furthermore, it allows us to identify possible theoretical-practical roots of the impossibility of affirming *conclusive* knowledge of the world. The world is not totalisable. The anthropological perspective developed by Ricoeur, the philosophy of 'capable human being', provides a general explanatory and justificatory horizon. Regarding the non-totalisability of the world, it is the philosophy of action incardinated in this perspective (rather than the anthropology) that provides a rationally justified theoretical key without need for metaphysical or ontological support.

1. From the phenomenology of the voluntary to the hermeneutics of the text

The tradition of French reflexive philosophy (Lachelier and Lagneau and others) is a spiritual ideal comparable to Laprune and Blondel's spiritualism and is the basis of Paul Ricoeur's first philosophical formation. However, it is neither the point of origin nor the point of support for his inquiries concerning the philosophical theme of action. These investigations begin on the ground of Husserlian phenomenology, which parallels Ricoeur with Sartre, though the Sartrean perspective on phenomenology is more markedly existential.

Accordingly, its clarification of the phenomenon of action is essentially developed by considering the question of human freedom and its part in the general philosophy of human existence. Ricoeur, who expresses a philosophy with a strong *practical* component, is more comparable to Merleau-Ponty, who also develops an applied phenomenology. Ricoeur makes on the will an operation similar to what Merleau-Ponty performs in the field of perception. This last is an easier field for phenomenology given the more secure, complete access to the immediacy of the connection between consciousness and the world and between knowledge and the lifeworld's reality. The phenomenology of the voluntary and the involuntary is set as a 'counterpart', in the practical order, to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (see Ricoeur, 1995, p. 23), only develops a description of representative acts to pursue the goal of 'widening the eidetic analysis of the operations of consciousness to the affective and volitional sphere' (*Ib.*, the trans. is mine). This gives way to an empirical anthropology and the hermeneutics of evil and culpability. It is in the first volume of the unfinished trilogy *Philosophy of the Will* (a project developed between phenomenology, empiric, and poetic-hermeneutics), entitled *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (1950) that Ricoeur's research develops its first descriptive analyses based around the thematic terrain of action. This validates the previous parallel between Ricoeur and Sartre. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), 'perception', 'perceived world' and (above all) 'the body' constitute the fundamental prerequisites through which the existentialist philosopher develops his phenomenological analysis of action and his existential examination of freedom; *Freedom and Nature's* analysis of the volitional dimension reveals the characteristic of an eidetic that takes the body into account and the matises the ontological-ethical-existential problem concerning the connection between *nature* and *freedom*. Sartre reaches a different solution than Ricoeur, arguing that freedom concerns the 'fundamental project' rather than the particular volitions and relative acts. The comparison between the two is nonetheless interesting and of theoretical significance regarding their terminological uses and approaches to certain themes. For example, we may compare the initial pages of Ricoeur's phenomenology of the will with those of *Being and Nothingness* in which Sartre uses the terms 'mobile' (motivation as quasi-causation or motive-cause) and 'motif' (motive) to illustrate the thesis that having reasons to act does not mean that those reasons are the cause of action, thus attacking both the deterministic and libertarian approaches in favour of a different deterministic perspective.

Ricoeur's phenomenological starting point is the description of the Cogito as a subject of will. I understand myself first as 'I want'. From this 'I want' comes the descriptive passage for the wanted; the wanted as the first instance, is 'what I decide, the *project*' (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 7). The *motive*, or justification of an action, is explicated by the 'why'. This first descriptive/comprehensive moment of the phenomenology of the will appears to be 'the reciprocity of the involuntary and the voluntary' (p. 4). 'I decide' can also emerge as the first structural element to join these two. This enables the relation of several functions, including need, pleasure, and pain, to the centre of perspective: the 'I' in Cogito (p. 7). Decision is action; to decide is to act. For acts of intention, decision is different from desire as it is endowed with intentional correlation; it 'knows' its object as it is 'established' or 'given' by me. 'To decide' is different from 'to command', because the command is immediately felt and 'experienced' as something 'depending on me'. In contrast, the decision is rooted in my own power/capacity and shows a reflective dimension: I define myself through the subject of my decision and the exercise of deciding. The act of deciding is the constitutive act of my mode of being.

At this point, Ricoeur deepens the discourse of the voluntary and involuntarily internal dialectics, reaching the dialectic of nature and freedom, which is useful to understand certain assumptions and characterisations of human activity and the broader framework of Ricoeur's general practical interest. Here, Ricoeur limits himself to the spheres of the interior and experienced life. He explains that. 'not all the involuntary is motive or organ of the will. There is also the inevitable, the absolutely involuntary with respect to decision and effort' (p. 8). The involuntary dimension exerts its influence even in the fundamental voluntary act of the decision. It does so directly, acting on the motives behind decision, the motivations that inevitably constitute, affect, and orient action. Motives are not causes. The *bios* (biological reality) expresses the need and impulse that affects motives in various ways. Because of the vicissitudes of life, a 'pathological automatism' can work in the unconscious, the functionality of which is linked to the same physical-natural causality taught by Freud. The deep dialectic between the voluntary and involuntary spheres is particularly evident within the second moment of the eidetic of the will, the precise moment regarding movement and action. Ricoeur sees a close, continuous link that joins decision and action. Decision implies, and is implied by, action and is realised through it.

Through phenomenological analysis of the spontaneity and functionality of the involuntary instance in action, defined as per formative abilities, habits, and emotional, deep expressions, Ricoeur concludes that a genuinely determined action is, *de facto*, the extension and incarnation of the will. Nature, motivation, and extent of action are not just Cogito's essential aspects; by observing the voluntary and involuntary perspective, we can determine the motivation/will of the individual. We can determine the person's 'I' of the Cogito 'the centre of a perspective', and the sense corporality related to it. The dimension of the involuntary defined 'absolute involuntary', rooted in corporality, acts as 'the terminus of that original act of willing' (*Ib.*). It relates to the Ego as the alterity of the Cogito. In light of this, the possibility of an integral experience of Cogito becomes a 'bet'; an existential, ethical, and ideological task or ideal. Ricoeur's 'reconquests' include 'I desire', 'I can', 'I intend', and, 'in a general way, my existence as a body. A common subjectivity is the basis for the homogeneity of voluntary and involuntary structures. Our description, yielding to what appears to the consideration of the self, thus moves into a unique universe of discourse concerning the subjectivity of the integral Cogito' (p. 9).

Ricoeur proposes that unification of interiority and corporality is possible because 'the nexus of the voluntary and the involuntary does not lie at the boundary of two universes of discourse, one of which would be reflection concerning thought and the other concerning the physical aspects of the body: Cogito's intuition is the intuition of a body conjoined to a willing which submits to it and governs it' (pp. 9-10). With this idea, the dualism of Cogito and corporality assumes the problematic dualistic physiognomy of body-object to body-subject. This problem can be attributed to Edmund Husserl's analyses of corporality and to Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of the correlation between motivation and motive. More generally, it refers to the theoretical question of cause and reason and the practical question of nature and freedom. Ricoeur solves the problem by addressing its reality, specifically the fact that there 'ought to be' a relation, 'because it is the same body' (p. 13). He also views it as a moral personal and perpetual dilemma; 'to consent', as Ricoeur sees it, is to recognise, accept, and embrace body and mind together as a continuous and difficult dialectical datum of natural necessity and freedom. This is a moral challenge that, under certain practical-emancipatory condition can reveal the experience of a unified dualistic reality.

2. From structuralism's challenges to a semantics of action

Oneself as Another (1990) contains a philosophy of action in which Ricoeur subsumes ideas from both the phenomenological passage for the voluntary and involuntary and the hermeneutical-analytical passage (as discussed in *Semantics of Action* [1977] and the series of essays collected in *From Text to Action* [1986]). The 'linguistic turn' and linguistic structuralism play a constitutive role in Ricoeur's philosophy of action; they parallel the analysis and examination of structuralism that Ricoeur deals with (the first in France to do so) regarding analytic philosophy and the problems concerning philosophy of action. This is accomplished through work with semantics (Strawson), pragmatism of language (Austin, Searle), and the analytical theories of action (Taylor, von Wright, Anscombe, Kenny, Davidson). Later, Davidson and Anscombe's research would become important for the development of Ricoeur's discourse of action).

Among Ricoeur's books discussed here, the one from 1986 offers a broader and more articulate synthetic point of view. It also provides the best general view of his passage through hermeneutics of text and hermeneutics of narration, linguistics and structuralism, philosophy of language, and philosophy of action. Text and action are the thematic poles that support Ricoeur's speculative development at this stage. The two are individually distinct but closely related, as stated in *From Text to Action*. Self-understanding is mediated through signs, symbols, and texts. Ultimately, self-understanding coincides with the interpretation applied to these mediatory terms (see Ricoeur, 1986, p. 30). On the other hand, there is an articulated and complex discourse on narration (both narrative history and narrative fiction) that is directly linked with the problem of action: it mirrors the significance of the convergence of action and narration regarding (1) self-formation, (2) self-knowledge and self-understanding, and (3) the process of prefiguring choices and actions. The 1986 volume addresses how the world of the text redefines and prefigures possible paths of real actions. It is with this in mind that we have to consider the possibility of understanding and knowing ourselves from a text. The text offers a factual possibility to us since it is not closed to the real world, which it in fact reflects, represents, re-describes, reinvents, and re-creates. This methodological and epistemological dialectic of action and narration (part of the theory of *narrative identity*) finds its roots in Ricoeur's 1973 paper, *Discours et communication* (see Ricoeur 1973 [2004]). Ricoeur's paper deals with the problem of communication by analysing the constituent factors of linguistic processes identified by Roman Jakobson, as well as the possibility of their radical problematisation.

The paper further addresses Emile Benveniste's opposition between *discourse* and *language*, and finally identifies the problems inherent in expressing discourses as events and understanding them as meanings ('tout discours, en effet, est effectué comme événement, mais compris comme sens' [Ricoeur, 1973, p. 30]). Thus, Ricoeur attempts to identify the foundation of a theory's communicability in discourse with a multiple discursive-disciplinary register. A multiple register discourse is articulated according to a coordination and hierarchy of three different levels of its subsumed semantics (*sémantisme*): the theory of statements, the speech-acts, and the intentions. While the philosophical treatment of action in *The Semantics of Action* is wider and richer than this, but it draws its core ideas from Ricoeur's article.

The Semantics of Action goes beyond the important dialectic conjuncture of phenomenological hermeneutics and the linguistic turn, exploring the deepening of the epistemological problem of explanation and understanding. It accomplishes this through a passage on the hermeneutics of the text and the problem of the epistemic status of Freud's psychoanalysis. *Semantics of Action* establishes the theory of action as a paradigmatic term of reference and, alongside psychoanalysis, history, and the theory of the text, creates a field for exercising and testing the possibility, validity, and applicability of a new epistemological model. Ricoeur defines this model as the *hermeneutic arch*, a theory and procedure that articulates explanation and understanding under the general work of interpretation. Exploring the contribution of language to the philosophy of action is the first objective stated in the opening of the *discours de l'action* (Ricoeur, 1977, p. 3). It pursues this goal by considering ordinary language as treated by the Anglo-Saxon philosophers. The essay conducts a critical analysis of the discourses in which the man says his doing ('une analyse des discours dans lesquels l'homme dit son faire' [p. 5]), an analytic that seeks to establish the linguistic bases of a theory of action through organisation into the three levels of 'concepts', 'propositions', and 'arguments' (pp. 5-10).

To develop the basic concepts or categories of action (intention, purpose, motif, desire, choice, preference, agency, and responsibility), Ricoeur draws on philosophical contributions from ordinary language, beginning with the second Wittgenstein. He develops his analysis of propositions, incorporating the concepts previously dealt with and defined, by drawing on research related to the theory of linguistic action (pp. 8-9). His investigation into the analysis of arguments focuses on the discursive dimension, specifically the means/ends concatenation which forms the discourse. After the linguistic bases are established, the task becomes finding the critical foundation of the theory of action. To do so, Ricoeur distinguishes between (1) linguistic analysis and phenomenology, (2) linguistic phenomenology and the human sciences, and (3) linguistic phenomenology and ethics (pp. 18-19; see Ricoeur, 1986b, p. 113ff). These distinctions are not merely disciplinary, but regard the dimension and reality of human action. The discussion then addresses the difference between the two universes of discourse, *action* and *movement*, to which it connects the duality of motif and cause. Ricoeur attacks this contrast by making explicit or implicit reference to his phenomenology of the voluntary and the involuntary, as well as to his hermeneutics of psychoanalysis. He highlights that at a very deep level, the interior, mental, life sense and energy, mind, and body, tend to converge and coincide. He further proposes that another kind of causality, the teleological causality, needs to be addressed (Ricoeur, 1977, p. 16). This makes it imperative to develop a description of the action at the level of ordinary language which corresponds to a teleological explanation of the systems of intentional action.

Speculative development around the theme of action and agency deals with the confrontation between motive and cause and the analysis of desire. Though not explicitly called the notion of agency, the first analytical description of 'motive' analyses the conceptual network of action. This same analysis is deepened by introducing the notion of 'agent', which implies a power to produce action. This implication supplants the reason/cause dichotomy, necessitating a re-definition of causation that *includes the means of producing*, or the agent's power to produce action ('la notion d'agent implique un *pouvoir* de produire l'action qui remet en cause toutes les dichotomies antérieures entre motif et cause' [p. 85]). Notions of action and motivation play a central role in the analytical description of this 'conceptual network of action'. This network includes 'action', 'intention', 'motivation', and 'agent', which are initially considered separately and then as they are connected to each other. Theoretical analysis of action defines the problem as the discursive dualism between the order of action and the order of the event, between doing and happening, and between action and movement. On the contrary, the theory of meaning explicitly states the interconnection of the terms of the conceptual network of action; this is made possible by the relationship between reason and intention as redefined by Ricoeur, which identifies the motive as the motive of an intention (p. 40).

Ricoeur states that the difference between reason and intention does not resign unless the motive is translated into the misleading formula, 'a reason for ...'. Intention answers to the question 'what?', whereas reason answers the question 'why?'; While intention forms and denotes action, reason explains it. It is at this point that Ricoeur introduces the theme of desire. Linguistic analysis reveals this reference to be, from a recursive perspective, incomplete. Though it has the merit of reintroducing desire to the field of motivation against improper attempts at reduction or objectification, the reference eliminates the energetic dimension from human desire. Desire spans the gap between the dimension of *bios* and the dimension of inner reality, or energy and meaning (p. 45). Motive and cause become coincidental within desire, as desire is a motivation when defined as 'a disposition to...'. The second stage of critical analysis of motive and cause developed in *The Semantics of Action* begins by considering the implications of the crisis of the modern concept of causality that relates to the idea of agency as power. Ricoeur focuses on two aspects related to Richard Taylor's argument put forward in *Action and Purpose* in 1966. The first is connected to the idea that agent causality is a basic or primitive philosophical category (p. 86), and the second is linked to the association of *agency* with the other concepts that form the descriptive network of action, specifically its conjunction with the concept of *purpose*. Ricoeur recognises Taylor's identification of the fundamental criterion that differentiates motive from physical cause. However, he suggests the limitations created by a dichotomisation between 'free action' and 'determined action' that does not consider a third intermediate internal component.

Taylor would be wrong by failing to consider the dimension of the involuntary expressed by the passivity of desire (p. 90). According to Ricoeur, the limit in this situation is the philosophy of ordinary language, because it is incapable of discussing desire as 'my passivity' or as a motive that cannot be entirely reduced to a reason. Motive is both the expression of a rational/rationalised argumentation and an irrational/affective 'disposition to' (an inner or corporal element that expresses 'my passivity'). The personal body not only constitutes the field of motivation and the organ of the voluntary motion, but is implicated in the reality of the absolute invulnerability (p. 129). Considered this way, the philosophy of action developed in *The Semantics of Action* explicitly links the outcomes of the phenomenology with the voluntary and the involuntary. This gives this phenomenology a new essence and the possibility of a new philosophical reading. Moreover, it provides valid proof of the viability of referring to the essential roots of Ricoeur's philosophy of action in his first philosophy of the will.

3. From philosophy of action to a hermeneutical philosophy of the self

Oneself as Another broadly references the speculative developments of voluntary and involuntary phenomenology while still referring to the problematic areas of action and corporality and to the wider sphere of philosophy of the self. *Oneself as Another* not only explicates that question concerning the subject, a theme which Domenico Jervolino points out is present in all of Ricoeur's research, also unifies and articulates the various levels/discourses involved. The levels are articulated as (1) the linguistic level, (2) the praxis-pragmatic level, (3) the narrative level, and (4) the ethical-normative level, which the text explores in the context of the question 'who?' ('who is the subject of language, action, narration, or moral responsibility/accountability?'). The heart of this interdisciplinary course is a hermeneutical phenomenology of the self, or a philosophy of 'who' as a *capable human being* who. The philosophical discourse of action plays a role both at the linguistic and practical levels. It resumes the dialectics of identity and narration, and defines an ontological itinerary around the Aristotelian dynamic of *power* and *act* or *potentiality* and *actuality*. Ricoeur's philosophy of the *homo capax* is (somehow) anchored in this ontology, and his theory of narrative identity is the precise expression of it. This is because of its dual dimension of being connected to the biological dimension of the self (*the fact to be an individual*) and to the historical experience of human living (*the experience to become a person*) (see Ricoeur, 1992). Narrative identity mediates and modulates the relationship between the natural and historical dimensions of human identity. Narrative identity reconfigures human action to fit within narration. Through such translation, human identity assumes a constitutive narrative connotation. Narration of action becomes the core of narrative identity, and makes action the primary function of personal identity, or *constituent*. I am *capable* because I *act*. I become a person because I *act*. This is possible because I *act*.

4. From capacity to initiative

Philosophical anthropology represents the speculative haven of Ricoeur's philosophy of action. Speculative analysis and discourse of action support such anthropology by nurturing (1) the linguistic and discursive analytic,

(2) the narrative hermeneutics, (3) the phenomenology of the voluntary and involuntary, and (4) the ontology of the being. The discourses focus on the philosophy of the capable human being.

The reciprocal effect between philosophy of action and philosophy of the human being produces an outcome which extends influence onto the world's ontology, knowability, and totalisability. Ricoeur's discourse regarding 'initiative', as developed in *From Text to Action* and *Oneself as Another*, deal heavily with this discursive passage. From the latter, we learn that 'initiative' intervenes in the course of the world through the agent of action. In Ricoeur's words, 'Initiative, we shall say, is an *intervention* of the agent of action in the course of the world' (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 109). Conversely, *From Text to Action* explains that to understand initiative, we have to reverse the order of priority between seeing and doing by thinking of the beginning not as the effect of a generic happening, but rather as an act which starts something or makes something happen. 'To do' and 'to act' do not allow for the totality of fate to be included in this whole; to act to act and do make reality not totalisable (Ricoeur, 1986, p. 270).

As part of the capable human being's faculties, initiative is a manifestation of man's power and ability to act. Action intervenes at the intersection of an agent's powers with the resources of the system. Initiative, as the beginning of something new, expresses this dual characterisation of expressing power-action dynamism and effecting world changes; it must be considered in calculations of possible and actual changes *to the* world. To conclude, human action ensures that the world is not ended, and initiative keeps the world's potential perpetually open. Thus, it can only be understood in the fullness and completeness of its implications. The world is always susceptible to new interventions, in both the senses of *novelty* and *renewal*. This latter determination does not depend from 'initiative', nor from 'to act' in an abstract or general sense. Rather, it is dependent on the individual to be put in question, the unique person with his/her own character and motivation, interpretations and judgements, and sense of responsibility. Such individuals' resolution to exercise power and to act is what can significantly change the course of events in the world.

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